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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 1ST BATTALION, 473RD
INFANTRY REGIMENT (SEPARATE) IN THE ATTACK
UP THE ITALIAN COAST, 8-15 APRIL, 1945
(PO VALLEY CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Heavy Weapons
Company Executive Officer)

Type of operation described: INFANTRY BATTALION ATTACKING
SUCCESSIVE OBJECTIVES IN A DIVERSIONARY ACTION

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ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of the 1st Battalion, 473rd Infantry Regiment (separate) in the attack up the ITALIAN COAST, 8-15 April 1945 during the PO VALLEY CAMPAIGN.

The ITALIAN PENINSULA was successfully invaded on 3 September 1943 by the British Eighth Army and on 9 September by the US Fifth Army. (1)

Many months of bitter fighting followed the invasion. A powerful Allied Offensive, beginning in May 1944 resulted in the breaching of the German GUSTAV LINE, junction of the Fifth Army main body with troops on ANZIO, the fall of ROME, and finally, the cracking of the vaunted GOTHIC LINE in September and October. At this time, within a few miles of the PO VALLEY, the advance bogged down for the winter. (2)

The 473rd US Infantry was formed 13 January 1945 from the troops of 4 separate Antiaircraft Artillery Battalions. Training as Infantry was begun immediately at MONTECATINI, ITALY, with combat experienced officers and men of several veteran Fifth Army divisions as instructors. The training was scheduled to last until March, but was ended after 31 days so the regiment could be utilized to reinforce the Winter Line. On 23 February

(1) A-1, p. 30-31

(2) A-1, p. 79, 80, 81; A-3, p. 1

the 473rd Infantry was attached to the 92nd Division (colored) and assigned a portion of the division's line in the SERCHIO VALLEY. (3)

Winter months of 1944 - 1945 were spent by the 15th Army group in improving defenses and preparing for the spring offensive. Early April, 1945 found the troops in approximately the same positions they had occupied since the attack came to a halt in October, 1944. (4)

THE GENERAL SITUATION

On 1 April 1945 the defensive line of the 15th Army group ran from a point about 5 miles south of MASSA, on the LIGURIAN COAST, generally northeast, to the southern tip of LAKE COMACCHIO on the ADRIATIC SEA. (See Map A) Only a few miles of mountainous terrain lay between Fifth Army and the level plains of the PO VALLEY where armor and maneuver could be employed to a great advantage. (5)

15
The enemy forces, composed of 23 divisions were disposed generally parallel and to the north of this line. Their divisions were understrength, whereas the Allied Divisions were overstrength. Also, they were far inferior in armor and air to the Allies. However, the enemy had also taken advantage of the inactive winter months to improve his positions, and now had strong defenses built up. (6)

15th Army group set 9 April as D Day. (7) Fifth Army, on the left, was to make the main effort. The plan for the

- (3) A-6, p. 1-2
- (4) A-3, p. 1
- (5) A-1, p. 88
- (6) A-1, p. 89
- (7) A-2, p. 38

offensive divided the operation into three phases. Phase I would be the breaching of the ^{N.S.} SANTERNO RIVER defenses and attack on BASTIA and BUDRIA by the Eighth Army, in conjunction with the Fifth Army attack to capture or isolate BOLOGNA. In Phase II the enemy forces south of the PO RIVER were to be encircled and destroyed by either or both armies. Phase III was to be the crossing of the PO and the capture of VERONA. (8)

Fifth Army planned to attack with both corps abreast. The main effort was to be initially astride Highway 64, with a secondary attack along Highway 65. Before reaching BOLOGNA, the bulk of the troops would be concentrated to the west of Highway 64. (9)

The 92nd Division (colored) reinforced by the 442nd Neisi Combat Team and the 473rd Infantry held positions on the extreme left flank of Fifth Army. The line ran from the flat LIGURIAN Coastal area south of MASSA to the left boundary of IV CORPS, 6 miles east of the SERCHIO RIVER, a total distance of about 22 air miles. (See Map A) (10)

Enemy forces opposing the division were the German ^{N.S.} 148th Grenadier Division and the Fascist ^N Italia Division. The reserve was believed to consist of about 4 battalions of Infantry, all of which could be employed in the coastal sector within 12 hours. Other reinforcements could come from the 90th Panzer Grenadier Division. For support, the enemy had an estimated 69 artillery pieces, with an added 15 self-propelled guns in reserve. (11)

(8) A-5, p. 9

(9) A-3, p. 23

(10) A-3, p. 36

(11) A-3, p. 37

The terrain in front of the 92nd Division was extremely difficult. On the left was a 3 mile wide stretch of level coastal plains, where the last of the German Gothic Line defenses were still entrenched. Immediately adjoining the coastal plains to the east was a stretch of hills and low mountain that could be traversed, although with difficulty. Extending across the remainder of the 92nd front to the SERCHIO RIVER was a range of almost impassable mountain peaks called the APUAN ALPS. (12)

The 92nd Division was ordered by Fifth Army to make a diversionary attack up the coast on D-4 or 5 April. It was hoped that this action would draw some of the reserves to this sector from the main front, and at the least, keep the forces facing the division engaged while the main effort was launched into the PO VALLEY. (13)

Because of the strong defenses on the coastal flats and the impossibility of maneuvering in the APUAN ALPS, the division planned to attack initially up the stretch of hills and low mountains overlooking the plains. (See Map B) The 442nd Combat Team on the right was to advance in the mountains with the mission of seizing MOUNT BRUGIANA, while the 370th Infantry, organic to the division, would move up the hill mass along Highway 1 to capture MASSA. (14) The 2nd Battalion 473rd Infantry was to initially be the division reserve.

(12) A-3, p. 36

(13) A-4, p. 30

(14) A-3, p. 37

At 0500 hours 5 April the attack was launched as planned, following a series of air attacks on enemy positions and gun emplacements on BIANCA POINT near LA SPEZIA. The 442nd Combat Team advanced steadily against strong opposition. However, the 370th Infantry, after advancing nearly two miles up Highway 1 was pushed back to the line of departure by a counterattack and mortar fire. Attacks scheduled for 6 April were not made due to enemy interception of attack orders and excessive stragglers in the regiment. (15)

The 2nd Battalion 473rd Infantry was committed on the morning of 7 April and the 1st Battalion was ordered to move from the SERCHIO VALLEY to the coastal sector on the same day. This move was accomplished during the night of 7-8 April and the battalion had closed in an assembly area southeast of QUERCETA before noon on 8 April. (16)

DISPOSITIONS AND PLANS OF THE 473RD INFANTRY

On the morning of 8 April, the disposition of the 3 battalions of the regiment were such as to make a coordinated effort by the regiment as a whole impossible. Although the zones of responsibility of the 473rd Infantry and the 370th Infantry were exchanged on that date, the 3rd Battalion 473rd Infantry remained in the SERCHIO VALLEY, as Fifth Army still considered this area a serious threat. This left the regiment with only the 1st and 2nd Battalions to be employed in the advance up the coast. The 2nd Battalion, already engaged with the enemy, had gained approximately 2000 yards along the hill

(15) A-2, p. 395

(16) Personal knowledge

mass by 8 April, bypassing STRETTOIA and was now occupying positions on the hill mass north of the town. (17)

The 473rd Infantry planned to continue the attack along Highway 1 with the 2nd Battalion and commit the 1st Battalion to the attack on division order. Subsequent action indicates that the regimental plan was to have the 1st Battalion advance astride Highway 1, to the left of the 2nd Battalion with the mission of protecting the division left flank and clearing that portion of MASSA left of Highway 1.

THE BATTALION SITUATION (18)

The 1st Battalion was about to engage in its first offensive combat of any magnitude as Infantry. Prior to this time, as the 434th Antiaircraft Battalion, the unit had operated as provisional Infantry for approximately six months, but with no preliminary training. During this period, most of the action consisted of the pursuit of a retreating enemy and holding defensive positions.

After being incorporated into the 473rd Infantry, the Battalion did receive 31 days training in Infantry tactics, as was previously mentioned, but this training was inadequate. The experience gained in the SERCHIO VALLEY during the defense there was of some value to the unit, but failed to teach many things that should have been known during the operations that were to follow. Very little training in Tank-Infantry tactics was received at any time. The men were completely unfamiliar with what was expected of them in situations where this type of coordination was necessary.

(17) A-3, p. 40

(18) Personal knowledge

On 8 April the Battalion was at full strength or possibly a little overstrength and completely equipped for combat. The armament included three 4.2-mm mortars with which the mortar crews were thoroughly trained in firing. There was no serious shortage of any critical supplies.

The 1st Battalion had operated on the LIGURIAN COAST as provisional Infantry in October 1944. The battalion was familiar with the zone of the present attack, however, only to such an extent as observation of the area had permitted. No patrols had been able to reconnoiter far past QUERCEDA during this period.

The terrain over which the battalion was to attack varied in nature from flat coastal plains to low hill masses. The coastal plains were cut by several small rivers and canals and numerous secondary roads. Highway 1 ran along the left flank paralleled by a main rail line. The hill masses ranged from approximately 200 to 600 feet in height.

The enemy's main defenses were on the level plains. Strongly fortified positions consisting of machine gun emplacements, tank and self-propelled guns, supported by planned artillery and mortar concentrations had been constructed along the waterways and some of the lateral roads. In addition, there were a number of tank ditches and mine fields, both antitank and antipersonnel.

The range of hills overlooked the plains. Enemy observation and fields of fire were excellent from their positions on the crests and forward slopes. Olive groves dotted most of these features, and each row of trees was terraced. These terraces and the steep inclines made movement up the slopes difficult,

in addition to giving the enemy ideal locations for preparing good dugout positions. Any advance up these hills was made more difficult through the employment of antipersonnel mines and barbed wire entanglements which were used in some instances.

The enemy defensive positions were echeloned in depth throughout the sector in such a manner as to allow him to pull back to prepare emplacements if the pressure to the front became too great. These emplacements consisted of dugouts, trenches, concrete bunkers and concrete pillboxes.

Enemy forces defending the sector were the 281st and 285th Regiments of the 148th Grenadier Division. Guarding the coastal flats was the 1048th Reconnaissance Battalion. The enemy strength was not accurately known. (19)

The weather along the LIGURIAN COAST was favorable for the coming operation. Spring was just beginning and most of the April days were reasonably warm. At night the temperature dropped, but not enough to cause more difficulty than extreme discomfort if one wore insufficient clothing or had no blankets. (20)

During the morning of 8 April elements of the 442nd Combat Team had made an unopposed entry into MONTIGNOSA and moved north past the town. (21)

The 1st Battalion was hardly settled in the assembly area near QUERCEDA when ordered by regiment to move to MONTIGNOSA and constitute the 92nd Division reserve. This move was accomplished and the companies disposed in defensive positions

(19) A-3, p. 14

(20) Personal knowledge

(21) A-7, p. 85

in the town by 2200 hours. Hopes were high that needed rest would be had here before the unit was committed to the attack.
(22)

In less than an hour, however, orders were received from the Regimental Commander for the battalion to attack toward MASSA at 2400 hours.

As little time was available, reconnaissance of zone of attack was not made. Some knowledge of terrain ahead had been gained by observation as was mentioned before, but the exact location of enemy defenses was unknown. However, since the 2nd Battalion, 473rd Infantry, was in contact with a portion of these defenses only a few hundred yards ahead, contact was assumed to be eminent any time after leaving the line of departure.

THE BATTALION PLAN OF ATTACK (See Map D) (23)

Later action indicates the 1st Battalion plan of attack. The line of departure would be the road between MONTIGNOSA and Highway 1. C Company was to cross Highway 1, turn northwest and advance on the left between Highway 1 and the railroad. B Company would advance to the right of Highway 1 while A Company would follow along Highway 1 as the battalion reserve. The D Company machine gun platoons would be attached one each to B and C Company and the mortars would initially support the attack from positions in MONTIGNOSA. No mortar or artillery preparation would be called for, no tanks would immediately be in support,

- (22) Personal knowledge; A-9
(23) Personal knowledge; A-9

nor would D Company mortar observers go with the rifle companies.

Communication between the companies and the battalion was to be maintained by SCR 300, SCR 536 radios and messengers. Wire contact would be kept only between the battalion and the regiment.

Strong support by artillery could be expected as the 92nd Division Artillery was reinforced by several non-organic units including a company of 4.2 mortars. Adequate armor support was also available. (24)

FINAL PREPARATIONS (25)

The final preparations for the attack took little time. Extra ammunition had been issued to the men prior to the departure from QUERCEDA and one day's rations after the battalion arrived in MONTIGNOSA.

Blanket rolls were dumped by platoons where they could be loaded on vehicles and brought up later. Then the battalion formed on the road. Here last minute checks were made to see that all men were fully equipped and that no noisy articles were being carried as the advance was to be as quiet as possible.

The battalion departed from MONTIGNOSA at approximately 2330 hours and moved out along the road that was the line of departure.

(24) A-3, p. 38

(25) Personal knowledge; A-9

NARRATION

THE ATTACK ON MASSA (26) (See Map D)

At 2400 hours 8 April 1945 the 1st Battalion left the line of departure and started the advance toward MASSA. C Company, moving up about 300 yards to the left of Highway 1, encountered some difficulty in crossing ditches along the trails and secondary road nets, as well as some canal beds which ran through the remnants of olive groves.

The battalion had advanced approximately 1000 yards when both forward companies encountered a wide minefield with both antitank and antipersonnel mines. Two men of B Company were injured when an antipersonnel mine was detonated. The advance was halted while a route through the minefield was hunted. This could not be found in the dark, and as none of the personnel had any experience in handling mines, both companies were ordered to move up Highway 1 until the field was passed.

With C Company leading, the battalion advanced carefully along Highway 1. As it was very dark by this time, vision was practically nil. Because of this, the battalion commander now decided to have the companies remain on the road and continue the advance in the present formation.

At approximately 0400 hours 9 April 1945 C Company reached a road fork near a small blown-out bridge and only a short distance from the outskirts of MASSA. Here the two forward companies were ordered to halt and dig in. C Company moved to the left of the highway while B Company took positions to the

(26) Personal knowledge; A-9

right. In moving off the road several more men from both companies were injured by antipersonnel mines sown around the blown-out bridge.

The men were so fatigued after two almost sleepless nights that many just fell in the ditches along the highway and went to sleep.

Just at dawn B and C Companies received a terrific artillery shelling. The regimental commander, who was in the battalion area, ordered C Company to move away from the highway toward which the fire was thought to be directed. In moving to the left through an olive grove, C Company had several men hit by shell fragments. C Company again dug in on the left about 400 yards from Highway 1.

Early in the morning of 9 April 1945 the battalion command post and aid station were established in TURANO, and the mortars of D Company were emplaced in a dry canal bed just southeast of the town. For an unknown reason, other than the lack of experience in employing the weapons, one platoon of the D Company heavy machine guns was also in TURANO. The guns were not emplaced and the men were resting in buildings. No mortar fire was called for by the forward rifle companies and no observation posts were established. (27)

The 1st Battalion remained in their positions during the morning, still receiving heavy artillery and mortar fire. On the left two small task forces, composed of elements of the 760th Tank Battalion and the 894th Tank Destroyer Battalion,

(27) Personal knowledge

moved up to position south of the FRIGIDO RIVER near the coast.

(28) On the right, the 2nd Battalion 473rd Infantry was advancing against moderate enemy resistance up the hill masses, but had failed to reach positions on line with the 1st Battalion as yet. This permitted heavy fire from the enemy held ROCCA HILL, almost directly east of the 1st Battalion, to be placed on any forces attempting to move into MASSA along or to the right of Highway 1.

In the early afternoon of 9 April 1945 C Company supported by a platoon of tanks reinforced by tank destroyers, attempted to enter MASSA. The men of C Company began the advance riding and following the tanks. The attack penetrated through the outskirts and was soon near the center of that part of the town to the ^{left} ~~right~~ of Highway 1. At this time, intense artillery and sniper fire caused the riflemen of C Company to leave the tanks and seek cover. Shortly afterward, one of the tank destroyers that had moved ahead when the C Company men dispersed, was knocked out by an enemy rocket launcher round. The other tanks and tank destroyers began to pull back to the outskirts of MASSA and C Company moved back with them. The company continued back to the positions from which the attack had begun. (29)

The heavy artillery fire continued throughout the rest of the afternoon and on into the night. Several more men became casualties including three Italian partisans killed while acting as litter bearers.

(28) A-8, p. 9-10

(29) A-8, p. 10; A-9; Personal knowledge

During the night, the enemy pulled back to the north side of the FRIGIDO RIVER leaving only small delaying elements in MASSA. Resistance had finally been broken by the advance of the 2nd Battalion 473rd Infantry and the 442nd Combat Team in the hills to the east. (30)

Just after dawn on 10 April 1945 the 1st Battalion again attacked toward MASSA. B Company moved directly up Highway 1, and entered the town with no opposition other than the artillery and mortar fire which still continued to harass the battalion.

C Company, advancing to the left of Highway 1, encountered some sniper fire but no strong resistance was met. Little time was lost in cleaning up these small nests of resistance and the company reached the FRIGIDO RIVER shortly after B Company's arrival. The battalion was then ordered to attack across the river.

CROSSING THE FRIGIDO RIVER (See Map D) (31)

Soon after B and C Company entered MASSA, the regimental command post and the 1st Battalion command post were moved into the town. Mortars of D Company were emplaced behind buildings near the river line to support the coming attack. A Company took positions close behind the assault companies.

In preparation for the attack the 1st Battalion shifted to the left, placing all of B Company in the river loop northwest of MASSA and C Company partially in the loop with the left flank extending almost to the railroad. This move spread the battalion over a wide frontage. The gap left between the 1st Battalion and the 2nd Battalion was filled by the Regimental Combat Patrol Platoon.

(30) A-6, p. 8

(31) Personal knowledge

The plan of the 1st Battalion was for B and C Company to make separate crossings supported and accompanied by tanks. All bridges across the river had been blown and both banks in the battalion sector were high and steeply inclined. The river was narrow here however, and the water was shallow and fordable by foot troops and vehicles in a number of places. But before the tanks could cross, a path would have to be cut in the banks by engineers.

B and C Company began immediate reconnaissance for suitable crossing sites, assisted by troops of A Company, 317th Engineer Battalion. This proved to be extremely difficult as any attempt to move forward and reconnoiter the river bank drew machine gun fire and direct fire from self-propelled guns, located in buildings and dug-in enemy positions across the river, and the enemy artillery and mortar fire seemed to never slow up. Friendly tanks could not move into positions from which these enemy weapons could be knocked out, and mortar and artillery fire did little apparent damage to them, particularly as much of the fire by D Company mortars was unobserved. It became more evident all the time that the engineers would have an extremely hard time constructing a tank crossing. (32)

Only one attempt to force a crossing was made by the 1st Battalion during the day. Lieutenant Trostle of B Company thought it possible that at one site, if he could get his platoon over the bank and down in the river bed, it would be below the line of enemy direct fire. This was tried and a portion of the platoon did get over the bank. However machine gun

(32) A-6, p. 8; Personal knowledge

fire was received and the platoon was forced to withdraw with one rifleman killed and Lieutenant Trostle seriously wounded.

About dark B and C Company were ordered to prepare defensive positions on the south side of the river.

To the right, the 2nd Battalion was more successful. During the afternoon a platoon of tank destroyers brought forward to the high ground south of the river supported the battalion by firing on enemy emplacements while a crossing was made. All of the battalion was on the north side of the river shortly after dark. (33)

The 1st Battalion was again ordered to attack across the river on the morning of 11 April 1945. As no tank crossing had been constructed, the tanks of the 760th Tank Battalion would have to cross later. B and C Company would again make the attack while A Company remained in reserve.

Supporting fire was requested by the battalion and heavy artillery preparations were laid on the enemy positions as the assault companies advanced toward the river bank.

C Company on the left with platoons abreast attempted crossing at three separate sites. The exact time that elements of the company were able to force their way over the river is unknown, but sometime in the late morning, the platoon on the right and most of the platoon on the left were successful in crossing and establishing bridgeheads on the north bank of the river. The center platoon with which the company commander had moved forward was unable to affect a crossing because of the intense machine gun and artillery fire by the enemy. (34)

(33) A-3, p. 40

(34) A-9; Statement of Sergeant Pratt, then Platoon Sergeant of the Left Platoon of C Company

Even before the platoon on the left was successful in reaching the other side of the river, radio contact was lost between the platoon and the rest of the company. All attempts to contact the platoon by SCR 536 radio, the only means of communications, were unsuccessful and neither of the other platoons could effect physical contact because of strong enemy resistance.

The left platoon meanwhile was met by small arms and machine gun fire from enemy positions near some buildings on the north side of the river. Part of the platoon was able to reach the buildings and later in the day succeeded in silencing two machine guns. As the rest of the platoon attempted to move forward to the buildings, an enemy light tank appeared and opened fire with its machine guns on the men in the open area between the river bank and the buildings, killing the platoon leader and 5 or 6 riflemen.

The tank then began firing at the men in the buildings, wounding several and forcing all to surrender. The C Company losses in this one action totalled approximately 23 men killed or captured. Numerous attempts were made to contact the rest of the company by radio before the surrender.

B Company succeeded in effecting a successful crossing to the left of the MASSA-CORRARA Highway bridge site at noon under covering fire from the 2nd Battalion on the hill mass northeast of the crossing site. (See Map D) (35) The leading elements of the company had advanced about 100 yards north of the river when the left flank was pinned down by machine gun fire and

(35) A-3, p. 40

grenades. The machine gun was silenced when Private William Ralston climbed to the top floor of a small building near the position, killed the gunner and forced two other Germans to surrender. This enabled B Company to complete the crossing and begin consolidation of defensive positions to hold the bridge-head. (36)

When all of B Company had gotten over the river, A Company followed using the same crossing site and assumed positions to the left of B Company.

Meanwhile C Company had been forced back across the river. In the withdrawal one of the platoon leaders and several riflemen were wounded by artillery fire. As enemy resistance at this point was too strong and other attempts to cross could not be supported by A and B Company because of the distance involved, the battalion commander ordered C Company to move to the right and cross over the same site used by the other companies. This order was carried out shortly after dark, and C Company was soon in position to the left of A Company. The battalion defense line was approximately 200 yards north of the river. (37)

At 2100 hours an enemy tank moved in close to the A and B Company positions and opened fire with its machine guns. However the tank fired for only a short time before retreating and did little more damage than cause a few of the men to rush back across the river in panic. (38)

Morning of 12 April 1945 found the 1st Battalion situation greatly improved. The 442nd Combat Team had entered CARRARA on the previous day, forcing the enemy in front of the 473rd

(36) A-6, p. 9

(37) A-9

(38) Personal knowledge

Infantry to withdraw during the night to positions north of the CARRIONE RIVER. A task force composed of elements of the 758th Tank Battalion reinforced by E Company, 370th Infantry and Cannon Company, 473rd Infantry was advancing to the left of the battalion protecting the heretofore open left flank. (39)

Under the command of Lieutenant Colonel John J. Phelan, who assumed command that morning, the 1st Battalion advanced to the town of NAZZANO, lying to the southwest of CARRARA, during the day. As had been expected, no enemy opposition was encountered on the way.

However, on reaching NAZZANO, the battalion was faced by strong enemy defenses. Just north of the town, across the CARRIONE RIVER the hill masses were heavily fortified by the enemy. Directly in front of the 1st Battalion were two of these obstacles. On the left was the small HILL 123 and to the right was the larger HILL 366 that was separated from the main body of the hill mass by a slight saddle. The battalion was given the mission of clearing these features of enemy resistance.

The rest of the day was spent in reconnaissance and in moving the rifle companies over the CARRIONE RIVER to get in position for the attack which was to jump off next morning. HILL 366 was to be the first objective.

THE ATTACK ON HILL 366 (See Map E) (40)

The 1st Battalion planned to attack with A and B Company abreast, B Company on the left. The line of departure would be the north road from CARRARA to Highway 1. C Company in reserve

(39) A-3, p. 41

(40) A-6, p. 11; Personal knowledge

would follow the advance and be prepared to attack through B Company some time during the day, on battalion order. The battalion command group would initially follow in the B Company sector, as observation could be more easily gained there. The combined battalion command post and observation post was located on HILL 102, south of the CARRIONE RIVER where the whole zone of action could be overlooked. The aid station was in NAZZANO and the D Company mortars were emplaced at the base of HILL 102 on the eastern side.

Casualties received by the battalion in taking MASSA and crossing the FRIGIDO RIVER had considerably reduced the strength of both B and C Company and all men were fatigued after prolonged fighting. However, signs of increasing confidence were being exhibited and the overall combat efficiency seemed on the incline rather than decline. This could have been partially due to the presence of an Infantry trained battalion commander who had experience in attack tactics. (41)

A and B Company crossed the line of departure shortly after dawn, 13 April 1945, following a heavy mortar and artillery preparation. Only a short distance had been covered when enemy mortar and artillery rounds began to land on both companies. The companies continued through the fire and began the advance up the hill. Here great difficulty was encountered. The combination of enemy fire and the steep terraced slope slowed the advance to a crawl. Each terrace was between 4 and 5 feet high and almost vertical. Men had a tendency under the rain of fire to hug the base of a terrace and not expose themselves by

(41) Personal knowledge

climbing to the next. In addition, small arms fire was soon being directed toward the companies from farther up the slope. During the morning, the battalion moved only a short distance up the hill. (42)

C Company, which was destined to play a major role in the advance up the hill, was committed to the attack through B Company at noon, with the two remaining platoons abreast, the 2nd platoon on the right. The battalion commander called for greater effort to be exerted in continuing the advance and also increased the mortar and artillery fire on portions of the hill from which enemy fire was coming.

By mid afternoon A and C Company had advanced approximately two-thirds of the way up the hill. At this point, the opposition became much stronger. The advance of A Company was stopped completely when almost the entire company front was brought under machine gun fire from the vicinity of FONTIA in the 2nd Battalion sector. Fire from these same weapons was slowing the advance of the 2nd Battalion.

Meanwhile, C Company had reached positions just short of a small road that ran parallel to the base of the hill. Along this road the enemy had two machine guns emplaced, with enemy riflemen in trenches, dugouts and in three small buildings, C Company advanced slowly against withering fire and a quantity of potatoe masher grenades which were rolled and thrown down the hill by the enemy. When one of the riflemen was wounded by small arms fire, the aid man who moved up to give him first aid was shot and killed, despite the fact that his red cross emblems

(42) A-6, p. 11; Personal knowledge

were plainly showing. This enraged the other men in the company and increased their determination to destroy the enemy. Heavier fire was placed on the enemy and the company began a more rapid advance up the slope. The machine guns positions were soon taken, several of the enemy were killed and six were captured. Then intense fire was placed on the three buildings into which the remaining enemy riflemen had retreated. These buildings were taken after a furious 20-minute firefight. However, only one prisoner was taken, as the other Germans had left by back exits and fled up the hill in the fight. C Company had one man killed and several wounded. (43)

As the company prepared to continue the advance, the 1st Platoon was stopped by machine gun fire from HILL 123 to the left and rifle fire from enemy positions near the top of HILL 366. The 2nd Platoon continued to move forward until a point about 300 yards from the church on the crest of the hill was reached. Here a wide stretch of barbed wire entanglements was encountered. As attempts to flank the wire failed because of enemy machine gun fire, the advance of the platoon was brought to a halt.

By this time darkness was beginning to fall, so rather than remain in the exposed position overnight, the platoon moved back down the hill. The battalion commander then ordered both A and C Company to dig in along the road for the night and prepare to continue the attack next morning.

Shortly after dark, C Company received some casualties that were very costly. Lieutenant Johnson, 1st Platoon leader,

(43) A-6, p. 12; Personal knowledge

and some of the key non-commissioned officers of the company had gathered behind the defensive positions to discuss plans for the following day. An enemy mortar round struck the olive tree under which the group was sitting, fragments from the projectile killed one of the platoon sergeants and two squad leaders and seriously wounded Lieutenant Johnson. As if this were not enough, Lieutenant Barnes, the 2nd Platoon leader, was killed shortly afterward by rifle fire while checking his defensive area, leaving the company commander as the only officer in C Company.

Two other problems arose that night that affected both A and C Company, namely the difficulty of getting supplies transported up the hill and casualties evacuated down. (44)

Supplies had to be hand-carried all the way up the hill as no roads that vehicles could use were available for this purpose. The difficulty in hand-carrying the supplies did not lie in the distance they had to be brought, which was not over a mile, but in the rough terrain that had to be traversed. One trip by a man carrying a heavy load took 4 to 5 hours in reaching the forward companies because of the slow rate of travel and fatigue. As both assault companies had expended a large part of their ammunition during the day, this had to be replaced, in addition to the rations and blanket rolls that had to be brought up. Even with the men that B Company could spare to help; almost all night was spent in getting these supplies to the forward troops, leaving little time for anyone in A or C Company to sleep.

(44) Personal knowledge

The manner in which casualties had to be evacuated did little to increase the morale of the other men. Although all care was taken to make the descent as easy as possible on the wounded, litter bearers could not avoid some jolting and bumping in moving over the terraced hillside. The descent was necessarily slow, causing long delays in getting proper treatment for the casualties. All this left a dread in the other men of getting wounded and undergoing the same punishment.

On 14 April 1945 the 1st Battalion was unable to advance more than a very short distance up the hill. The flanking fire from the machine guns on the slope near FONTIA and on HILL 123, combined with the resistance ahead, effectively held the battalion back. However, the D Company mortars and the supporting artillery continued to pound the enemy positions ahead, during the day. (45)

The 2nd Battalion was also having a difficult time taking FONTIA. The same machine guns that were playing a part in holding up the advance of the 1st Battalion were also delaying the 2nd Battalion. But just before dark, the machine gun positions were taken and the battalion was able to occupy FONTIA, relieving some of the pressure against the 1st Battalion.

THE CAPTURE OF HILLS 366 AND 123 (46) (See Map E)

The 1st Battalion again attacked toward the top of HILL 366 before dawn on 15 April 1945, following fierce preparation fires by artillery and mortars. C Company led the attack with A Company following to the right rear.

(45) A-6, p. 12; Personal knowledge

(46) A-6, p. 12; Personal knowledge

C Company men passed to the left of the barbed wire entanglements and assaulted the positions in and around the church, where the enemy had his strongest defenses. After a furious firefight in which the company used rocket launchers, grenades and a great volume of small arms fire, the church was rushed and captured. The Germans retreated to a network of trenches on a knoll about 100 yards away.

From the positions just taken, C Company continued to fire on the enemy in his new positions receiving heavy fire in return. A number of the company riflemen and one automatic rifleman occupied the church, climbed to the upper part and fired down into some of the nearer trenches. The battalion commander, who had followed close behind the advance, moved into the church and directed the fight from there.

Just before noon, the squad commanded by Sergeant Antonio Tamas was given the mission of assaulting the enemy positions. Under cover of protection fire by the rest of the company, the squads rushed the positions in the face of the enemy fire. Sergeant Tamas, on reaching the first trench, jammed his rifle in the face of the German occupant, and using the man as a shield, marched him to the other position, forcing him to tell his comrades to surrender. Sergeant Tamas and his squad took 52 prisoners from the positions with the loss of only two men wounded. (47)

A Company in advancing up the hill to the right captured another group of prisoners, a number of which were wounded, in

(47) A-6, p. 13

some buildings near the crest of the hill. HILL 366 was now completely in the hands of the 1st Battalion and one more obstacle to the advance up the coast was removed. (48)

While defensive positions were being organized on the hill, enemy mortar and artillery fire was again received. As the battalion commander knelt by his radio inside the church to report the capture of the objective, an artillery round landed inside the door. The battalion commander, his radio operator, several men from A and C Companies, and a number of prisoners were killed. Major Richard Verheul, the battalion executive officer, assumed command of the battalion. (49)

On the last day of the fight to capture HILL 366, B Company was not idle. As the long range from HILL 123 had played a big part in holding back the advance of A and C Company on 14 April 1945, the battalion commander gave B Company the mission of capturing the hill. (50)

B Company moved from its reserve positions on the slope of HILL 366 before dawn on 15 April 1945 to take up attack positions south of HILL 123. After an hour's mortar and artillery preparation, the company moved out in a column of platoons with the 3rd platoon in the lead and the 2nd platoon bringing up the rear. In moving around the base of the hill to the right, the 3rd platoon surprised 11 Germans and captured them without a fight.

(48) Personal knowledge

(49) A-6, p. 13

(50) A-6, p. 13

Near this point, the company started up the hill. As no fire was being received from the enemy on top of the hill, they apparently were as yet unaware of the presence of B Company.

When the company was about half way up the hill, the 2nd platoon rushed through the ranks of the 1st and 3rd platoons in a dash for the top. The two lead squads reached the top without a casualty and captured 11 more prisoners from one of the concrete bunkers before the Germans awakened to the fact that they were being attacked. The rest of the platoon reached the top of the hill after suffering several casualties from machine gun fire by the now alert enemy, and joined in the assault on the defensive positions. After a furious fight, lasting only about 8 minutes, the hill was taken and the remaining defenders either killed or captured.

During the remainder of the day enemy artillery pounded the hill causing B Company several more casualties. At dusk a light counterattack was made against the B Company positions but was repulsed with little difficulty.

As a result of the action that day, the company had killed or captured 40 prisoners and lost 4 men killed and 11 wounded.

On 15 April 1945 the battalion gained two important objectives and again forced the enemy to retreat.

To sum up the results of the action: During the 7 days in which the 1st Battalion had participated in the attack up the coast, approximately 6 miles of enemy territory had been taken against strong enemy opposition. (See Map C) The action had resulted in heavy losses and disorganization in the enemy forces opposing the battalion. Nearly 150 prisoners had been captured, and many of the enemy had been killed or wounded. (51)

(51) Personal knowledge

The enemy units defending the sector had been so badly decimated that they were forced to use artillerymen, marines, sailors and service troops as replacements. Some of the prisoners reported that they did not know how to fire their weapons and had no idea of what the units were with which they had been fighting. (52)

Also, one of the overall missions of the 92nd Division, that of keeping the enemy to its front engaged, had been materially abetted by the action of the 1st Battalion. The enemy was forced to commit troops and artillery that could well have been used against the main attack of Fifth Army that was now in progress. A portion of the enemy reserves had been committed and the 286th Regiment of the 148th Grenadier Division had sent one of its battalions from the SERCHIO VALLEY to bolster the coastal defenses.

Although the losses of the 1st Battalion had been high, later action proved that the combat efficiency of the unit was not seriously impaired. The amount of ammunition expended by the battalion is not known, but an indication is given by the fact that nearly 4000 rounds of 81-mm mortar ammunition was fired during the 3 days of fighting on HILL 366. (53)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

1. TRAINING

Much of the difficulty and delay in capturing some of the 1st Battalion objectives can be traced directly to the lack of

(52) A-6, p. 13-14

(53) Personal knowledge

adequate training of the unit. Although the battalion had some prior experience as provisional Infantry, this did very little toward preparing the men to cope with the type of resistance met in the action from 8-15 April. Also the 31 days of training at MONTECATINI was far too short a period. Not nearly enough time could be spent in conducting small unit problems under simulated attack conditions. Had it not been necessary to commit the 473rd Infantry in a defensive role in February, the added training that could have been received would have been of immeasurable value in the attack up the coast.

The crossing of the FRIGIDO RIVER might possibly have been accomplished on the first day and with fewer casualties had the rifle companies known how to properly conduct fire and maneuver and how to employ their supporting weapons more effectively. More knowledge of the tactics to be employed in attacking a river defensive position would also have been of much value in this operation.

In organized Infantry training centers men are normally trained in the use of all Infantry weapons. This could not be done too thoroughly with the men of the battalion in the short period of time allotted. The result of this deficiency was a shortage of experienced alternates to operate certain weapons such as the automatic rifle, rocket launcher, and machine guns when the regularly assigned operator became a casualty. This occasionally resulted in the decrease of needed fire power.

2. MORTAR FORWARD OBSERVERS

In not sending 81-mm mortar observers forward with the rifle companies in the attack, the battalion lost much of the effectiveness of the mortar fire and on some occasions, failed entirely

to have this support when it was greatly needed. Depending on the rifle companies to call for and direct mortar fire when it was required proved to be a mistake. The riflemen and their leaders were usually too preoccupied with other problems to do so. However, if they had been more experienced in observing and controlling the fires of the mortars in an attack situation, it is possible that better coordination would have been effected.

Had efficient observers of which there were a number in the mortar platoon of D Company, been in position to direct the fires of their weapons, many enemy strong points that delayed the rifle companies could possibly have been neutralized. Again the crossing of the FRIGIDO RIVER is a good example. Accurate and observed mortar fire on the enemy machine gun, rifle and self-propelled gun emplacements north of the river could have greatly hampered the defense of the river line, and made the crossing by the 1st Battalion easier and less costly.

3. COMMUNICATIONS

The failure of communications was one cause of the loss of almost an entire platoon of C Company. Although the use of wire was impractical in the situation confronting the company at the time, if the radios used had been more efficient, the loss may have been avoided. If contact by radio had been maintained between the platoon and other elements of the company, supporting fire might have been gotten from the artillery or tanks before the enemy tank was near enough to overrun the bridgehead.

4. TANK-INFANTRY COORDINATION

One cause for the failure of the 1st Battalion to take MASSA on 9 April was the lack of Tank-Infantry coordination.

This was largely due to the lack of knowledge by the riflemen of what was expected of them and just how to operate with the tanks effectively. However, the armored was also at fault. A thorough plan had not been made and neither unit was sure of what the other would do. If the attack had been coordinated and all contingencies considered, the advance may have continued. Mutual support was completely lacking and when both units saw they could expect no support from the other, the only thing left to do was retreat.

5. SURPRISE

By surprising the enemy on HILL 123, B Company gained a quick victory with little loss. Had the advance up the hill been slower, the enemy would possibly have known of the attack in time to defend more strongly. The defenses of the hill were strong enough to have made the task of taking them an exceedingly difficult one had they been fully warned by an alert enemy. The 22 prisoners taken without a fight could have bolstered these defenses and made the capture of the hill possible only after a long drawn-out fight. Had the enemy been able to hold the hill, harassing fire on HILL 366 could have caused the 1st Battalion troops a great amount of trouble while defenses were being consolidated.

6. ADVANCE OF ADJACENT UNITS

The position of the 1st Battalion was made less difficult on more than one occasion when the 2nd Battalion, 473rd Infantry, on the right, was successful in forging ahead. The breaching of the FRIGIDO RIVER Line by the 1st Battalion was greatly assisted when the 2nd Battalion was able to give supporting fire from the

hill mass forward of the crossing site. Again when FONTIA was taken and the machine guns in that vicinity were silenced by the 2nd Battalion, the continuation of the advance on HILL 366 by the 1st Battalion was made less difficult. And when the hill mass southeast of MASSA was cleared of enemy resistance by the advance of the 2nd Battalion and the 442nd Combat Team on 9 April, the 1st Battalion was able to enter the town next morning with little resistance encountered.

7. INDIVIDUAL AGGRESSIVE ACTS

The action of Private William Ralston in single handedly cleaning out the machine gun nest that was holding up the continued advance of B Company across the FRIGIDO RIVER was a major factor in the success of the crossing. And the aggressive spirit shown by Sergeant Antonio Tamas in advancing into the defensive position of the still-armed enemy on HILL 366 was undoubtedly a direct cause of the early surrender of the enemy. In either instance mentioned above, the enemy resistance would likely have continued, causing more delay and casualties for the unit involved, but for the aggressive action of one man.

LESSONS

1. Before being committed to combat as Infantry, units converted from other arms should receive thorough training in all phases of Infantry tactics and techniques.

2. The 81-mm Mortar Forward Observers should advance with the assault companies in an attack in order to ensure adequate mortar support.

3. All precautions should be taken by a unit before making an attack to ensure that continuous communication will be maintained with its subordinate units.

4. To be successful, a Tank-Infantry attack must be closely coordinated.

5. The element of surprise, when properly utilized, can win battles with little cost to the attacker.

6. The difficulty of taking an objective by an attacking unit can be greatly decreased when an adjacent unit is able to advance past the objective.

7. Aggressive action by one man will often be responsible for the successful completion of an attacking unit's mission.